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AUTHOR Wright, Helen M.
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ABSTRACT

The document examines the rights of women in the church and in society, with emphasis on attitudes of the American Catholic Church. Christian educators should acknowledge the issue as a reality in today's world, and examine it with the following question in mind; "What is God's call for women at this moment in the history of the American Church and American society?" Historically, the Church and society were in opposing camps. Women were criticized by the clergy for speaking publicly on abolition and suffrage. Before and during World War I, militarization made the women's movements difficult, as many of the women were pacifists. Catholic women did not identify with the pacifist stance, reflecting Church attitudes of the time. The founding of the United Nations in 1946 saw women's rights become a global issue with increased gains in political rights by law. By the 1960s, women discovered that equal rights by law did not insure equality in fact. Factors still needing attention include illiteracy and equal educational opportunities, equal employment and pay, inclusion in policy making, economic handicaps, and leadership opportunities. Church attitudes changed. Pope John XXIII implied support for the world women's rights movements and Vatican Council II in 1965 laid down fundamental principles regarding human rights, including women's rights. However, no reference was made to the rights of women inside the church. Conclusions include that the church must address inequality and injustice inside ecclesiastical structures as well as in society and that the goal of Christian women must be "to strive for a Gospel response to the use of power." (CK)

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THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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Helen M. Wright, snd
Washington Theological Union

THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Helen M. Wright

Who would come to hear a discussion on the rights of women in Church and society? After due consideration of the question, I decided that perhaps the participants could be divided into three groups: 1- the protagonists of movements in both sectors, hoping to confirm their dreams of an androgyneous society; 2- the antagonists, firm in their conviction that women's movements are undermining both the American tradition and the Christian tradition; 3- the compartmentalizers for whom the issue is appropriate in the socio-political sphere but a heresy in the Church. Needless to say, I make no pretense to satisfy all three groups or any combination of them. But I suggest that, as Christian educators, we do two things: a) we acknowledge the issue as a reality in today's Church and society; b) in faith we raise up the issue with this question, what is God's call for women at this moment in the history of the American Church and American society?

An examination of the history of the women's rights movement in the United States would indicate that, from time to time, the issue placed Church and society in opposing camps. As you may know, the movement had its roots in the abolition movement. In the 18th and 19th centuries, women as well as men worked actively for the abolition of slavery. But when women tried to address public meetings on the issue, they were strongly critized by clergymen and others. At the World Anti-slavery Meeting in London in 1840, women were refused official status as participants. American women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who attended the meeting with their husbands were relegated to seats in the back of the room behind closed curtains. Except in Quaker circles, St. Paul's admonition was faithfully adhered to; women did not speak in public. Yet half of the slaves they were working to free were women; the irony of the situation was not lost on the women.

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton shocked women and men alike by daring to propose at a public meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, that women should have the right to vote. This was the first organized effort in known history on behalf of women's rights. There is clear evidence that the American Catholic Church did not support the suffragette movement. For example, a headline in the New York Globe, June 22, 1911, reads, "Prince of the Church Declares that Women's Descent into Politics Would Rob the Home of Its Best Uplifting Influence". The article that follows quotes Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore (the prince mentioned in the headline) as follows: "Must a husband returning home from work go to the polls to find his wife? Must a child returning home from school go to the polls to find his mother . . .I am not unaware of the cry of women for 'equal rights'. It seems to me that women of this country and other countries confuse 'equal rights' with 'similar rights' . . .Woman is queen, said the Cardinal . . .but her kingdom is the domestic kingdom".

Nine years later, March 8, 1920, the New York World reports Cardinal O'Connell of Boston as "making a vigorous protest against what he termed "sinister feminism" at the closing exercises of the mission for men at the Holy Cross Cathedral. "There is no doubt", he says,"that one of the main causes of this sinister feminism . . .would appear to be the growing weakness on the part of the manhood of the nation".

But it was not just the Church that made women's rights movements difficult. A growing factor was the effect that militarization had in sex-role differentiation. Historically, men who had greater muscular strength were entrusted with the task of defending the tribe, the city state, the kingdom and the nation. Women contributed to group security in another way -- through child-bearing and nurturing. Boys were trained in values and skills

related to competition, prowess, courage, strength, agressiveness, which came to be prized as "masculine"values. Values associated with the nurturing role, such as gentleness, patience, love, sensitivity, compassion came to be labeled "feminine". Thus war and its preparation obscured and restricted the human potential in both women and men for a fully human experience. Furthermore, the extension of the "masculine" values into the political-economic endeavor of American society gradually created a social order built on these values. Clearly, early suffragettes did not advocate women's rights at the expense of their "feminine" values; they did not aspire to values related to militarism. Their opposition to war proves the point.

Many of the women in the movement were pacifists, as opposed to war as they were to sexist inequalities. This was particularly true of the Quaker women. Unlike women in most of the other religious groups, Quaker women were accustomed to speaking in Quaker meetings and knew what contributions they could make. But not only Quaker women rejected militarism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and other women rejected the popular slogan directed against early suffrage groups, "The Ballot and the Bullet". If women wanted to vote, the slogan implied, then they had to be willing to fight. Undaunted, women's groups continued to align suffrage and pacifism, even though World War I diverted attention from the suffrage issue. The Women's Peace Party was formed by women from North America and Europe. Its members convened two world congresses at the Hague in 1915 and 1919; the object was to stop war and prevent future wars.

Ironically, the first group of women convoked by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the century was called together to coordinate women's energies toward supporting American efforts in World War I. They formed the National Committee on Women's Activities, a division of the Biships' National War

Council. Gradually, 4,589 women's organizations linked themselves to the War Council. Both in the United States and abroad, they were prepared to work in typical service jobs, i.e., in the canteens, in hospitals. They were not encouraged to go into war industry. In fact the NCWC communiqué directed to women linked the causes of war with women's working outside the home. Women's absence from the home was also blamed for the increase of divorce, the use of contraceptives and the disregard for religion and authority. Thus Catholic women did not identify with the pacifist stance of the women's movement. They never took an independent public stand on the issue of war and peace but consistently reflected the attitude of the hierarchy, the parent organization.[1]

With the founding of the United Nations after World War II, women's rights issues took a quantum leap into a global dimension. In 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women was established with the mandate "to promote the equal rights of men and women in the political, civil, economic and social fields". When the UN was founded, only one-third of the 51 member nations had granted political rights by law to women. Now, all but eight of the present 149 members states have granted women suffrage by law.

However, by the 1960's and early 1970's, women everywhere were discovering that equal rights by law, while necessary as a first step, had not insured equality in fact. The UN Proclamation of 1976-1985 as The Decade of Women is encouraging women to examine thoroughly the factors still contributing to the equality gap. Presently, women see five factors that need to be addressed:

1- Of the approximately 800 million illiterates around the world, nearly two-thirds are women and yet equal education is the key to personal and national well-being;

2- although women in many countries are the central figures in agriculture, food preparation, health care, nutrition, children's welfare,

population control and other vital areas related to economic and social development, UN development projects have done little to encourage women's involvement in the planning;

3- in many countries, women constitute one-third or more of the heads of households and are the sole support of their families and even extended families; yet in the rich and poor countries alike, women find themselves concentrated in a limited number of jobs, frequently at low levels of skills and responsibility with equally low wages;

4- women are handicapped in obtaining credit, mortgages, loans, insurance, tax benefits and other economic benefits;

5- women have discovered that to make progress in other areas, they need to have more women in positions of political leadership. But in most countries and in the UN, women's leadership positions tend to decrease as the center of power is approached.[2]

The lack of women's involvement in planning and deliberations related to the world order issues is not just a tragic loss for women; it is a loss for the whole human family. Women know that they have a contribution to make at a moment in history that is critical. Women's rights movements are not just a bid for power as some opponents to the ERA in the United States would say. Patricia Mische points out the basic injustice well: "In an age of nuclear proliferation, women are equal to men in the threat of annihilation. Nuclear weapons do not discriminate on the basis of sex. But women are not equal in the decision-making power to reverse the distribution trend. The arms race underscores the horrible fact that women are equal in death, but not in the power and means to choose life".[3]

And how has the Church responded to this Women's Rights Movement around the world ? In a certain sense, it has taken a quantum leap too, at least in some of its official documents. Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical, Pacem in Terris, written in 1963, names the woman issue as one of the three distinctive "signs of the times" along with the rise of the

working class and the emergence of the developing nations. He had this to say about women:

> . . .it is obvious that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations with a Christian tradition and more slowly but broadly among people who have inherited other traditions and other cultures. Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim in both domestic and public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person.[4]

Indeed, as we have pointed out, certainly in this country women are claiming in both public and private life the rights that befit a human person. But it is not at all clear, despite what the Pope implies, that this is being done under the aegis of the Christian tradition, especially that of the mainline Churches. It is interesting that the Pope makes no direct reference to the rights of women in the Church. However, for women's rights movements in Church and society, the principle that Pope John lays down next is crucial:

> For if persons (man) become conscious of their rights, they must also become conscious of their duties. Thus those who possess certain rights have likewise the duty to claim those rights as a mark of their dignity, while others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them.[5]

So the critical principle is that, once conscious of one's rights, a person has the duty to claim those rights and others have the obligation to acknowledge and respect them. It is precisely on the basis of this principle that women struggle in Church and society today. Indeed, there are women who have a new consciousness of the inequalities that result from sexism; they have a deeper level of awareness of the resulting distortions

of human values. Following Pope John's principle, this consciousness becomes a moral imperative for them to act on behalf of justice.

In 1965, two years after Pope John's encyclical, Vatican Council II in its Pastoral Constitution, Gaudium et Spes, laid down another principle that furnishes a theological basis for equality between the sexes. This is what it had to say:

> Since all human beings (men) possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition. . . .with respect to the fundamental rights of a person, every discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion is to be overcome and eradicated . . .Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right to choose a husband, to embrace a state in life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to these recognized by men.[6]

What is the principle at stake here? When the fundamental rights of a person are being violated on the basis of sex, race, social class, etc., such discrimination must be eradicated. Such is the will of God based on the intention of God's creative action. A principle like this calls for action against injustice in unequivocal terms. Thus movements in American society like the ERA and in the American Catholic Church like WOC cannot be written off as machinations of a few power-hungry radical feminists. The issues that they hold up to society and to the Church for consideration must be examined seriously.

It becomes clear, then, that the contemporary Church through its official teaching office has laid down some fundamental principles regarding human rights. The task at hand is their implementation in concrete situations within the Church. Some of the justice issues that con-

cern women's rights in society have been enumerated. But how do women name the violations of their rights in the Church at this time in history? I confine myself to three points:

1. On the basis of their baptism which initiates them into the priesthood of Christ, women believe that a potential call to public ministry in the Church should be tested by those who represent the Church Universal and that their call should be confirmed if it proves to be genuine.

2. The practice that links jurisdiction and orders should be seriously questioned on the grounds that it excludes women as well as all lay people from decision-making power in the Church.

3. The exclusion of so many people (especially women) from the possibility of public ministry and jurisdiction in the Church distorts the image of the Church, symbolized in the Eucharist as a community of love where discrimination on the basis of race, sex, color, social condition has no place whatsoever.

A feminist perspective fosters an integral view of reality. In the history of women's movements, as we have seen, sexism has always been linked with other justice issues such as racism, classicism, militarism. Consequently, from such a perspective, women cannot allow the Church to address issues of injustice and inequality <u>in society</u> without simultaneously examining and naming violations of justice <u>within ecclesial structures</u>. The Church must practice the principles of justice within its own structures that it so eloquently proclaims for the world. Unless it does so, it risks credibility in a world that desperately needs to hear its prophetic voice.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that granting women's rights in Church and society is no guarantee that the strucutres of Church and society will thereby be automatically improved. Once the granting of

basic rights has been achieved, the question of power emerges. In the last analysis, Christian women must raise up for themselves as well as for Church and Society, one question, namely, what kind of power truly mediates God? Is it the kind of power that exercises command and control over human beings or the kind that gives itself in service to others? Is it the kind of power that destroys the goods of the earth or the kind that nurtures and re-creates them? Is it the kind of power that employs violence to achieve its ends or the kind that reconciles and arbitrates? In my view, to strive for a Gospel response to the use of power, is God's call to women at this moment in the history of the American Church and American Society. Without such a goal, the striving for women's rights in Church and society has no meaning.

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3. Ibid., p. 5.

4. Pacem in Terris, art. 41.

5. Ibid., art. 44.

6. Gaudium et Spes, art. 6.